

"Turning Lives Around"
Thursday, 01 March 2007
Inland Empire

By Chris Levister

By his own description, Brian Simmons is a small-time hustler who has been in and out of prison most of his life, a man who of late is trying to turn his life around.

In 2005 after serving 26 months for selling stolen property the 33-year-old San Bernardino man walked out of the California State Institution for Men at Chino with \$200, a bus ticket and furniture manufacturing skills he learned while locked up. However, when he applied for various jobs on the outside he faced a hostile and unsympathetic hiring public.

"When they find out I'm on parole, they basically slam the door in my face," said Simmons. With few places to turn for work Simmons went back to selling 'hot' goods. Within a year he was back in prison.

His story of recidivism plays out thousands of times in the California prison system. According to Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation statistics 70 percent of inmates paroled in the state return within 5 years. It's a statistic Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and Corrections Secretary James Tilton have vowed to change.

Under a newly established carpentry pre-apprenticeship program that trains inmates in construction skills and places them in union jobs, paroling inmates like Simmons now have a link to jobs and hope for staying clean.

Last month 24 inmates from Folsom and California State prisons graduated from the Career Technical Education Carpentry Pre-Apprenticeship Program at Folsom State Prison.

The vocational training program is sponsored by the Prison Industry Authority (PIA) and the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council.

Dressed in neon yellow jumpsuits the graduates smiled for media cameras while calling the training program a "new lease on life." Through the program the inmates learned a number of skills that will help them find jobs upon their release such as conventional carpentry and construction skills, painting, roofing, concrete pouring, drywall and framing.

Paroled inmates are eligible for placement in a full scale carpenter's apprenticeship program which leads to union jobs. Tools were provided by the PIA and training was provided by the Carpenters Training Committee for Northern California. The PIA will pay the initial union dues for inmates who complete the program and join the Carpenter's Local 46.

"They will have a marketable skill," says PIA General Manager Chuck Pattillo. "Parolees are coming back into California communities and are either unprepared and going to commit more crimes, or prepared and going to become tax paying citizens rather than tax consumers," he said. "This program can help make the difference."

Pattillo said the program is the first of its kind in the United States. "It costs about \$43,000 a year to keep you here and \$250,000 per year to administer this program," he told graduates, "if just six of you don't come back, this program pays for itself. If all 25 of you don't come back, I save the state almost \$1.1 million. With that I can establish another four or five of these training programs at other prisons."

Pattillo's goal is to put career technical education in every prison in the state. "I need a small favor from you guys," he said. "Don't come back."

Inmates must have at least 12 months left to serve, but no more than 48 months. Participants must have a GED or be enrolled in GED classes and must be in good health.

At Folsom State carpenters trainees are constructing modular structures using steel studs. The units are sold to state and federal agencies.

At the California Institution for Women 20 female participants are reconstructing a 4000 square foot facility used to train female firefighters. The old facility had been condemned. Of the total 120 inmates currently in training 50 males and 20 females are scheduled for re-entry in the Southland.

Pattillo said L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has called on the PIA to assist in the re-entry of carpenters trainees returning to L.A.

"We are currently submitting a proposal for a similar carpentry training program in southern California," said Pattillo, "however, the carpenters union has rejected our proposal once, but is now re-evaluating."